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Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution at MoCA

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LOS ANGELES

WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution

Micol Hebron

Connie Butler's pink-glass swan song, "Wack!", closes her tenure at MOCA (before moving to MoMA), and (re)opens the dialogue about feminism. The exhibition features 119 international artists and offers a sampling of art and the feminist revolution from 1965 – 1980. "Wack!" has many shortcomings: the lack of explanatory wall texts, the lack

of an index in the catalogue, the dearth of black artists. Then there is the 'sex sells' tactic of the catalogue cover image, the inclusion of certain artists, and the exclusion of others. But "Wack!" also brings good. Much like the seminal, feminist-generated consciousness raising groups of the '60s and '70s, this exhibition promoted discourse,

community and education with an unprecedented program of lectures, performances, screenings, artist-lead walk-throughs of the exhibition and dinner parties around Los Angeles during the first run of this show. It has been by way of the exhibition coupled with these events that the feminist dialogue and revolution has been reinstated.

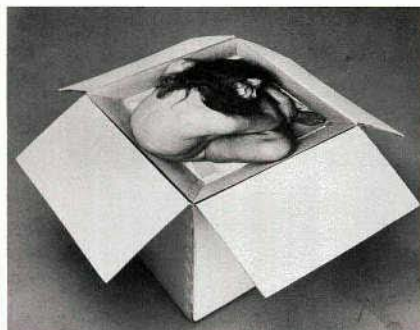
The exhibition is as difficult for critics to navigate as the history of feminism itself is. There aren't any easy categories, easy definitions, easy timelines, or easy choices. Feminism, feminist art and consequently "Wack!" (8 years in the making), have wrestled for years with the complexity of representation — gendered, politicized, aestheticized, deconstructed or otherwise.

The overwhelming amount of work in this show illuminates how feminist art was revolutionary in more ways than any other art movement in the 20th century. From performance to installation, video to practices of institutional critique, it was often the courage of feminist artists that kick-started or significantly redirected numerous genres of art.

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From left to right: Cozey Fanni Tutti with Instruments for 'Marcel Duchamp's Next Work,' c. 1970. Photo: Coum. Courtesy Cabinet, London; Martha Rosler, Nature Girls (Jumping Janes), from the series "Body Beautiful or Body Knows No Pain," 1966-72. Photo-montage, dimensions variable.



WACK! from page 91.

With the recent resurgence in artist collectives, it's inspiring to note the dozens of women's groups that are referenced in the exhibition: Women's Action Coalition, Disband and Spider-woman Theater, to name a few. Magdalena Abakanowicz's enormous woven vagina *Abakan Red* (1969), Lynda Benglis' poured sculpture *For Carl Andre* (1970), Kirsten Justesen's *Sculpture II* (1969), a *tromp l'oeil* woman in a box, offer radical manipulations of

form. Ulrike Ottinger's films and Rose English's performances are prototypes for successors such as Matthew Barney or My Barbarian.

Another oft-overlooked aspect of feminism is the fun factor. So many of the artists in the show have attested to how fun (and funny) feminism could be. It is exciting and refreshing to hear and see feminist art revitalized and complicated with the notion that the angry, militant, bra-burning revolutionaries were also having a really good time. Martha Rosler's performative video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) appears in a different light when viewed in a room full of heartily laughing second-generation feminists. Margaret Harrison's campy erotic drawings, including *The Little Woman at Home* (1971), offer a powerfully-charged alternative to the mid-century use of pop iconography, as a buxom super-hero gladiator rests her stiletto boot on a Brillo box.

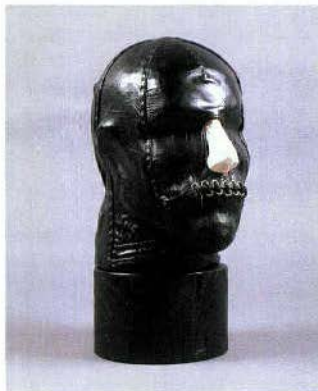
The body politic is evident in nearly every work in the show. There are, of course, myriad

ways of contextualizing it — the body in pain, the body in waiting, the body at risk, the body as aggressor, the body as tabula rasa for cultural expectations. No movement, genre, or canon since has endeavored to so thoroughly explore the impact of the body in society, media and politics. Among these ground-breaking works are Mary Kelly's analytical and structuralist assessment of motherhood and identity (*Post Partum Document*, 1973-75) and Adrian Piper's philosophical exploration of race, identity and existence (*Concrete Infinity Documentation Piece*, 1970). Today, as the US sees women and black candidates on the presidential campaign trail, as bodies are blown to pieces on a daily basis in the Middle East, as abortion rights are still not secured in every State, and maternity leave is technically classified as 'disability leave,' the reminder and revival of the feminist battle cry "The personal is political" and its inversion, the political is personal, seems more relevant than ever.

"Wack!" fills in some of the deep

holes in art and exhibition history. But as many have noted, it is in fact just a beginning. The "Wack!" website (<http://www.moca.org/wack/>) has done a remarkable job of informing, recording, dialoging and bringing people together — in short, getting things going, as feminism did 40 years ago. While it may be a little much to sit around and look at our vaginas together, at least people from LA and elsewhere might stop navel-gazing for a while and look at something else in the world around them.

—MH



Top, left to right: Carolee Schneemann, *Portrait Partials*, 1970. Thirty five gelatin silver prints, 68 x 66 cm; Colette Whiten, *Structure #7*, 1972. Wood, ropes, concrete blocks, 170 x 345 x 94 cm. Courtesy Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario. Photo: Cheryl O'Brien; Kirsten Justesen, *Sculpture II*, 1968. Painted cardboard box, photograph, 48 x 58 cm. Courtesy Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen. Left: Nancy Grossman, *No Name*, 1968. Assemblage, 38 x 17 x 25 cm. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York.